How To: Prep for a Debate

Debates are a great way to highlight why you are running and ultimately should answer why students should elect you to a position in leadership. Whether you are running to be your faculty’s next councillor or president, a senator, or vying to be the USC’s incoming VP University Affairs, VP External, or President, you’ll likely have to debate fellow candidates.

If an election race is competitive, election debates will occur during the campaign period with the possibility of multiple debates, especially for the USC Presidential campaign.

This brief will provide tips on how to prepare for a debate: before, during, and after.

**Before a Debate**

*Understand the Debate Structure*

Before a debate, you need to understand what kind of debate it is. Understand the rules and format of the debate and figure out if the debate will include cross-talk or not. For a Faculty Councillor debate with multiple candidates, there will be less cross-talk and you will have limited opportunities to counter points made by opponents. A debate with fewer candidates and a format that allows all candidates to counter argue will create a different style of debate that you should prepare for.

*Practice*

The best way to prep for a debate is to **practice, practice, practice**. Have your campaign manager and some campaign members prep with you so you get used to speaking in front of a group. Sit on a chair across like you would in front of an audience and have a mic or object that mimics a microphone to help you get used to the movements. The more you are familiar with even the little things, the more comfortable you will feel.

Have your team come up with questions that are likely to be asked during the debate by both the moderator and students when they get their Q&A period. To make practice beneficial, you need to be able to effectively communicate:

- Key election issues
- Your key messages
- Where you diverge from opponents
If your debate prep allows you to answer hard questions on the hot topics of the election, refine your key platform points, and show how you differ from fellow candidates, you’re more than ready to debate.

During a Debate

**Express Your Key Messages**
The most important part of a debate is to express your key messages. Be prepared to answer: “why are you running?” and ensure your key messages are reflected in this answer. Your campaign pillars are a great place to start, but make sure you are consistent with expressing what the most important part of your campaign is. No candidate has time to read out their platform, so focus in on the most prominent points and stick to those.

Key messages are short statements of 3-5 words that are easy to remember and summarize the goals of your campaign.

**Differentiate Yourself from Candidates**
Don’t be afraid to express what makes you different from other candidates. That’s the entire point of the debate! Undecided voters get to see how campaigners differ on key elections issues. If the debate style allows for cross-talk, you can use your counter arguments to express how you and your campaign differs on a particular topic. If there is limited cross-talk, express your point in the answer and try to incorporate why it’s different from other campaigns if time allows it.

**Rhetoric and Decorum**
Understand your audience and adjust your speaking style accordingly. Speak clearly and concisely. Be passionate and proud of your campaign and express that in your voice (avoid a monotone voice). Use hand gestures, but remember they can also distract your audience if used too frequently. Be respectful and courteous towards the moderator and opponents.

Debates can be mild in nature, or become more heated depending on the candidates and questions. Remember to hold yourself to a high standard of decorum and stay calm during a heated exchange. Take a deep breath before expressing a counter argument and speak with honesty and integrity. Students tend to turn away in frustration with candidates who speak aggressively. Avoid interrupting fellow candidates and any behavior you don't want reciprocated back towards you. If someone is interrupting your point, express that you would like to finish your interrupted point before the next candidate speaks.
After a Debate

Thank your opponent(s) and the moderator for taking the time to debate. Debates are nerve wracking for all candidates so be kind and proud of yourself! Debates are one of the more difficult parts of a campaign. Recognize how brave it is to put your skills, knowledge, and experience in front of the student body. Students appreciate when candidates are honest, passionate, and proud of their campaign.

Reflect on your performance
With your campaign manager and relevant team members, review your performance and ask: what did people like about my performance and what could be improved. This will help you in your preparation for future debates.

Respond to Points of Information
If a point or fact was contested during a debate, after the debate, if the fact matters to students and your campaign, make a point to publish or respond to the debate fact in a statement afterward.